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# Rebels may not topple Sandinistas, but could ruin their revolution

Last of three articles about the anti-Sandinista rebels.

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras - A costly civil war is taking place in northern Nicaragua.

After 3½ years and \$80 million in US funds, the anti-Sandinista rebel forces fighting the leftist Nicaraguan government have grown from 600 guerrillas closely tutored by the Central Intelligence Agency to an autonomous insurgency of more than 10,000 peasants - and still growing.

In part, the Sandinistas' heavy-handed leftist policies fueled the rebellion. Thousands of otherwise neutral Nicaraguan families are unwilling for their sons to be drafted into what they view as the army of the ruling party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN.

Other rebel supporters or recruits are likely to be the result of a new Sandinista program to uproot and forcibly resettle up to 42,000 people in areas of guerrilla infiltration in the north. Sandinista soldiers have razed homes and burned crops, and new refugees have begun to show up in Honduras this month.

## Congress debating more aid

This war is also President Ronald Reagan's. Leaders of the contras, as the rebels are known, say the CIA provided rifles and bullets for at least 8,000 guerrillas, logistical help from the air force of El Salvador, radio equipment, aerial reconnaissance and assistance which other Central American insurgencies never received.

Congress is now debating whether to release \$14 million in CIA funds for the contras, held up since June. Even if they get the money, the most realistic contra

leaders concede, they can't guarantee a triumph against 100,000 Sandinista forces, including army, militias and reserves, equipped with modern Soviet counterinsurgency weapons.

"A frontal military victory is extremely difficult," said Aristides Sanchez, secretary general of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, FDN. The rebels' strategy, he said, calls for the Sandinista government to collapse in the face of a popular insurrection, like the one in 1979 that brought down the late US-backed ruler, Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

Diplomats here and in Managua doubt the uprising will materialize in Nicaragua's cities. The Sandinistas have

militant followers throughout their army officer corps, and have a FSLN party network that galvanizes hundreds of thousands of government supporters ready to die for their anti-American cause - and keeps close tabs on Nicaraguans who are not.

## Contras can damage economy

If the contras don't get American aid, the guerrilla army of frustrated conservative farmers still will fight a hit-and-run internecine war for years to come against other rural farmers who make up the Sandinistas' forces.

The Administration, in backing the rebels, may not succeed in removing the Sandinistas, as Reagan said was his

goal. But the contras can gut Nicaragua's economy by forcing the Sandinistas to divert 40 percent or more of their dwindling government budget to war. They can block the Sandinistas from de-

livering on their promises to bring food, education and health care to all Nicaraguans, and further radicalize the nine "comandantes" who run Nicaragua by backing them into a political corner.

The contras' war, in short, can ruin the Sandinista revolution and cost thousands of Nicaraguan lives.

There are at least six rebel armies, including two Indian groups and 1,000 troops in southern Nicaragua under the unpredictable Eden Pastora. By far the largest army is the northern-based FDN, which claims to have 14,000 fighters.

## Elimination of contras unlikely

Pastora, the only contra commander who appears to have genuine appeal for Nicaraguans, is broke and increasingly isolated in his stand of distrusting both the Sandinistas and the United States. One Indian leader, Brooklyn Rivera, is negotiating peace with the Sandinistas on his own. Another, Steadman Fagoth, is largely discredited.

The Sandinistas say they will wipe out the FDN in the next two years. But the FDN stages its operations from at least five big camps in sanctuaries inside Honduras, where 4,000 to 5,000 fighters can retreat to wait for a Sandinista offensive to blow over.

One contra asset is that they can get enough Nicaraguan currency with \$5 million they received from private donors in 1984 to pay northern Nicaraguan villagers for supplies. At black market rates, according to Armando Lopez, head of logistics for the FDN, it costs only \$10 a month to keep a contra in the field. Poorly provisioned Sandinista troops often have to take food without paying for it, angering local peasants.

But Lopez said the contras haven't

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been able to arm themselves by capturing Sandinista weapons because government stockpiles are heavily protected and many zealous Sandinista regulars don't give up easily.

#### **Rebels limited to ambushes**

In recent months FDN leaders say it has been difficult to supply patrols in the impenetrable jungles of central Nicaragua. Often a unit out of ammunition, must wander around in the bush avoiding Sandinista troops.

Vastly outnumbered, the rebels are limited to bloody and unpopular highway ambushes and sabotage attacks against government installations. In a late January ambush on an unprotected state social security agency vehicle, contra forces shot and killed two men, a woman and a 10-year-old child who were going to visit relatives in the army.

"We lamented that incident," said Lopez. But his forces have frightened away sympathizers with such tactics.

Still, leaders say the FDN is prepared to escalate in coming months, particularly if the Sandinistas begin to use new Soviet-made MI24 "Hind" attack helicopters they obtained last November. Enrique Bermudez, commander in chief of

FDN, threatened to bomb Nicaragua's only refinery if the MI24's go into action.

#### **Hondurans fear rebel banditry**

The contras still receive logistical support from the military of Honduras, although armed forces chief Gen. Walter Lopez demanded last July that Bermudez move his headquarters away from Tegucigalpa to the border. Honduran officials fear rebel banditry and an influx of refugees if Congress ends its aid. But US officials say Honduras has made no move to expel the rebels.

The Sandinistas have resisted so far the temptation to strike contra bases in Honduras. Honduran officials have told the rebels they will not aid them in such an event. But the move could be used to justify a joint US-Central American retaliatory assault against Nicaragua, according to diplomats in the region.

White House officials have been seeking alternative ways to help the contras if Congress turns them down in the upcoming vote, now expected in late April at the earliest. But US officials in Honduras say no contingencies are actively being considered here.

One alternate strategy for the United States would be to build up Honduras to "contain" the spread of Sandinismo, one US official said. The official estimated it

would at least involve upgrading Honduras' air force with 12 F5 US fighter jets, at \$12 million each. So far, however, the Administration continues to press for contra funds.

#### **Less fear about aid cutoff**

Some US legislators suggested they might vote for aid if it were tied to an improvement in the contras' human rights record. But last week Bermudez rejected such a compromise. The former colonel in Somoza's National Guard did say, however, that he would step down from his command if it would guarantee US support.

US officials are more optimistic than they were about the consequences of the lack of CIA funding for the rebels. In January, officials warned as many as 150,000 contra fighters and their families might pour over the Honduran border. But this week a senior US official said, "I think it's noteworthy that the money ran out last June, and so far the problem has not materialized."

*End of series.*